

1982

The pursuit of form

Robert Allen Anderson
Portland State University

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/open_access_etds



Part of the [Art Practice Commons](#), and the [Sculpture Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Anderson, Robert Allen, "The pursuit of form" (1982). *Dissertations and Theses*. Paper 3451.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations and Theses by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. For more information, please contact pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

THE PURSUIT OF FORM

by

ROBERT ALLEN ANDERSON

A Thesis Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

SCULPTURE

Portland State University, 1982

TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ART AND ARCHITECTURE:

The Members of the Thesis Committee Approve the
Thesis and Report of Robert Allen Anderson presented
20 December 1982.

[REDACTED]
James L. Hansen, Chairman

[REDACTED]
Mary A. Constans

[REDACTED]
Robert L. Kasal

[REDACTED]
Michihiro Kosuoge

[REDACTED]
Glenn G. Gauer

APPROVED:

[REDACTED]
Leonard B. Kimbrell, Head, Department of Art and Architecture

I was at a personal crossroads in my work when I began my graduate program at Portland State University. I was open, uncommitted, and to be completely honest, a bit lost in the turmoil of historical and contemporary art. I had therefore begun my studies by investigating many styles, and, on several occasions, I even contemplated a return to figurative work. Gradually, however, I realized that my dashing from one style to another was self-defeating. I was finding no pleasure or interest in any of my new investigations, and worse, I seemed to be getting further and further away from discovering anything meaningful about my own sculptural preferences.

This crisis, a difficult experience at the time, turned out to be a positive step for my work. I was forced to re-examine all of my previous work and to assess it on a literal and qualitative basis. By going through this long and arduous process I began slowly to understand my own artistic nature. I discovered that, for me, sculpture was most interesting and rewarding on a formal level, which is to say, I was simply most intrigued by the effects I produced through the manipulation of volumes, lines, and surfaces. The actual physical aspect of the work was the basis of my interest, and thus the essence of my own particular vision existed exclusively within the form of the objects produced.

Armed with this newly discovered insight I soon found that the only work that still interested me that I

produced in those first troublesome months was a piece I had begun long before entering school (Fig. 1). It was a complex, yet pure, exploration of line and volume. It bulged, swirled, and undulated as though it possessed a life of its own. It was a work that reflected entirely my sense of form and returning to it marked the renewal of my artistic energies.

As it has turned out, and without any real design on my part, my thesis show has become an exploration of the possibilities of this one watershed work. After discovering its potential I proceeded to produce varying combinations of its formal elements. I divided, simplified, opened, closed, and contrasted many of its characteristics. I attempted to realize fully its strengths and its limits.



Figure 1

(9" x 8" x 6")

Knots (Fig. 1) is the name of the first work, and, as one can readily see, its basic form is actually based on the double knot. The initial design was developed with the use of square leather shoe laces (a technique which I also used for several other thesis pieces) and, though this base form is of interest in itself, it was not the element which totally captured my fancy. I found much more satisfaction and interest in the articulation, delineation, and modeling of the various parts; the contrasting of a flat plane to a swelling bulge, or the development of a curving surface against a negative space. The base design gave me an interesting format in which to explore these subtle harmonies, but it was up to me to bring them to life.

This first work was completed in bronze, a medium completely new to me. I found it difficult to manipulate, and demanding in the repetitive steps required to bring a piece to realization. It did, however, provide for freedom of design and a myriad of surface variations which I felt finally outweighed its undesirable aspects.

Upon completion of this work, I felt only a general sense of satisfaction. I was pleased with the appearance of rhythms within the form, but I was a bit unsettled with the blunt areas. I therefore decided that the strength of the work existed in what I call "the animated beam context". That is, the base form which would look like a solid four sided beam when held straight, but when bent and twisted,

would seem to possess living attributes, if rendered properly. I resolved in my next work to pursue fully that single aspect.

I think it is important to state here that I have always tended toward what I call "the enlivening aspect" in sculpture. Even during my first unsettled months in the graduate program I would instinctively lean toward the bulging form and curving line. These preferences, to me, tend to activate the form, and, in fact, to give a sense of life and interest to the work. This sense of movement and grace, when properly articulated, seems to be at the very root of my artistic sensibility.

The second work grew naturally out of the positive aspects of the first work (Fig. 2). As can be seen in this piece, I released the form by eliminating any squared off areas. What is finally created is a rather heavy, yet strong, endless line motif.

With this work I attempted to make the volumes and the lines move in a rhythmic manner. Here, the interpretation is, one would hope, a lively rendition of a fairly common form. Its strength or its weakness, again, lie with the subtle development of the surfaces.

This piece was also finally realized in bronze, and it was also only a partial success. I feel now that the symmetry of its design presented a difficult barrier for my attempts to enliven it visually. The stolidness of

the piece as a concept is at war with its own bulging surfaces.



Figure 2
(12" x 12" x 12")

While these results left me a bit defeated, I decided not to abandon totally the basic form in my next work. I built upon what I had learned. In the future I would allow for more freedom for experimentation and expression, but I would retain the integrity of the previous works' surface and line.

At about this time, I was investigating another medium new to me, stone. This was very exciting for me. I worked with sandstone and it yielded to me much more quickly than

did process-oriented bronze. I also found none of the problems that supposedly exist when one carves down to find form rather than building up as in modeling. The difficulty exists in finding the proper surfaces and their relationships to each other, not in the technique required to yield them.

One negative aspect I quickly encountered with stone, however, was that by its brittle nature there exists specific design limitations. Certain types of extending shapes and precarious designs are completely beyond its capability as a medium. Thus, while I remained excited by stone work, I realized that many of my ideas were only applicable to bronze. I decided that the use of both materials was necessary. The form I wanted to realize was the paramount issue, not the medium.

The third piece was the result of the mixing of form produced first in bronze then carried out in sandstone (Fig. 3). I decided to extend the use of the animated beam and to use again a looping format. The difference here was not only the medium, but also a fanciful twist in the upper portion of the work. This allowed for more formal articulation and for a visual surprise for the viewer. I could again indulge in the surfaces and forms, but this time the overall concept would also help to sustain interest in the work.

Along with these aesthetic changes, two puzzling

elements appeared within this third piece. I found that penetrating the stone with a long vertical opening, and mounting the work slightly off its base were actually attempts to somehow lighten the stone, to make it bend to my will and not allow it to dictate to me what could be accomplished.



Figure 3
(14" x 26" x 9")

The fourth work in my development marked a return to bronze. With this piece I was dealing with an extreme simplification of my basic formal concerns (Fig. 4). Here, I decided to test the limits of the soft, gentle areas of my previous works. I based the design upon a large disk shape and made the transition from outside edge to inner core a long full sweep. This gave the work a perceptible bulge when examined closely. I approached the theme of animation again, but in a very understated form.



Figure 4

(22" x 22" x 4")

I would add that in this particular work, I, again, deviated from the basic design, as I have done in the previous works, by slicing a section of the form on one side. This too, was an attempt at visual surprise. It was in response to a need I felt in the piece. The structure of the work was so obvious and common, that I felt this single visual quirk was needed to keep the piece from being simply banal.

The fifth work in my thesis, represents my most ambitious work (Fig. 5). This is a large sandstone piece, and in it I returned to the nature of my first piece. Again I attempted to carry out that surging sense of line and form which I find so stimulating. And again I tried to use the spirit of movement and rhythm that I had been investigating throughout all of my work.

By the very size of this piece, I found certain challenges for which I was unprepared. It is hard to realize the impact of a piece on a scale which is a great deal larger than one's models. The success of the work can often only be determined with its completion.

This piece, however, taught me a great deal about scale and the limits of reliance upon formal techniques. I realized that many characteristics in my first works could be pursued and expanded, but that they had to be done within the framework of a new context. Just a simple increase in size will not work if one does not

deal with the piece as a new work with new formal considerations.



Figure 5
(39" x 26" x 14")

The last of the bronze pieces (Fig. 6) in my thesis project was my next work. In this work, I attempted to free the animated beam completely from the constrictions of my tight knot-like pieces. Here, I allowed the form to move freely in a full circle, then to swirl quickly in several tighter loops before returning to the plane of the sphere.

The piece is an attempt to animate through formal

composition. The sense of the moving form and subtle harmonies of line and surface are merely being delineated on a more open pattern. I am really attempting, in this piece, to further enhance a form which, by its nature, is already quite lively.



Figure 6

(40" x 40" x 8")

The last two pieces in my thesis show (Figs. 7 & 8), though similar in form to the previous works, really represent the beginnings of a change in my work. They are of stone, and in both I have left rough, unfinished

areas where I would once have had smooth surfaces.

The first of these (Fig. 7), does relate to my other work, simply by its curving animated form. By contrast, however, its rough chiseled surface separates it from the others. I feel that by making this decision, I have preserved a more spontaneous quality which the highly finished works do not possess, and by doing so I have gained a feeling of directness between viewer and object.



Figure 7

(11" x 9" x 4")

The second of these works (Fig. 8), also retains many of the elements of line, movement and fullness that were present in my previous pieces, but again, the in-

clusion of rough passages, make its impact more basic.



Figure 8
(22" x 5" x 15")

I would propose that these latter works reflect my emphasis on attempts at formal elements. When one is confronted with the work I have produced all seen together, the reaction could be numbing. There is little contrast amongst any of them. It is one long soft bulge, curve, or line, against another. The rough textured areas of these last two pieces, however, introduce an exciting variation in formal elements. If anything, they actually provide a stronger setting for the enlivening elements I find so important in my work.

In all, my thesis project has been the working out of my own concern with the formal elements of sculpture.

I have attempted to discover the limits of the undulating line and the animated beam. I have even begun to reshape the basis of my composition in order to strengthen further the expressive quality of my work. I have simply pursued my own sense of form in a way that I found most exciting and rewarding.